
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF
COMMERCE
NEWS

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20230

NATIONAL
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NOAA 02-021
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
April 2, 2002

**NOAA Fisheries Seeks Comment on Proposed
Moratorium on For-Hire Permits in Gulf of Mexico**

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) is seeking comment on a proposed three-year moratorium on new charter and headboat (for-hire) permits for the reef fish and coastal pelagic fisheries in Gulf of Mexico federal waters. The proposal is part of a gulf-wide strategy to help rebuild these fisheries. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

The proposal would also separate the for-hire permitting system for Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic coastal migratory pelagic fish, currently managed under a joint permit. The moratorium would cap the number of for-hire vessels in the Gulf of Mexico pending further analysis of the stock abundance for species in the reef fish and coastal migratory management units.

"The Gulf Council has worked closely with industry to stabilize fishing effort in the for-hire sector," said Dr. Joseph Powers, acting regional director of NOAA Fisheries' southeast region. "Between 1981 and 1998, charter boat operations in the Gulf grew by 147 percent, coinciding with a significant jump in the number of fish stocks identified as overfished or approaching an overfished state."

These stocks include some of the most stressed fish stocks in the Gulf region, including red and vermillion snapper, red grouper and greater amberjack.

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This trend of for-hire vessels landing more fish from stocks that have become severely stressed was a key consideration leading the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council and the for-hire industry to propose this moratorium. If implemented, it will cap the number of vessels in those fisheries until a comprehensive approach to restoring overfished stocks is fully developed.

The moratorium is part of Amendment 14 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Coastal Migratory Pelagic Resources of the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic and Amendment 20 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Reef Fish Resources of the Gulf of Mexico.

All fishing activities have contributed to the overfishing of Gulf reef fish and coastal pelagic species, but the increased proportion of effort in the for-hire sector indicates that this sector may be growing at an unsustainable rate. For example, for-hire vessels accounted for 90 percent of the recreational vermillion snapper landings and 63 percent of the greater amberjack recreational landings in 1995-1996.

Copies of Amendments 14 and 20, which include an environmental assessment, and a regulatory impact review (RIR), and copies of two related minority reports opposing the proposed moratorium may be obtained from the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, Suite 1000; 3018 U.S. Highway 301 North; Tampa, FL 33619; (813) 228-2815; gulf.council@noaa.gov. The proposed rule is also posted on the Internet at: http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=2002_register&docid=02-7128-filed.pdf.

Written comments on the proposed rule must be submitted by May 9 to: NOAA Fisheries, Southeast Regional Office, Sustainable Fisheries Division; Attn: Phil Steele; 9721 Executive Center Drive North; St. Petersburg, FL 33702. Comments may also be sent via fax at (727) 570-5583.

Comments on the information collection requirements in the proposed rule must be submitted by May 9 to: NOAA Fisheries; Southeast Regional Office, Permits Team; Attn: Robert Sadler; 9721 Executive Center Drive North; St. Petersburg, FL 33702. Comments will not be accepted via e-mail.

NOAA Fisheries is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources through scientific research, management, enforcement and the conservation of marine mammals and other protected marine species and their habitat. To learn more about NOAA Fisheries, please visit <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>.